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# ***Haunts and Follies***

Penny Byrne

Sam Leach

Simon Mee

Kate Rohde

Curated by Simon Mee

# Haunts and Follies

I always pictured a haunt and a folly as some bizarre spooky pseudo ruin, partially overgrown, where teenagers liked to hang out. The ground littered with evidence of their passing, empty cans, cigarette butts and others items of a rubbery nature. The kind of place that if you were watching a D grade horror movie you just know that a girl and a guy would go on particularly inauspicious night and meet some grisly end.

*Haunts and Follies* was a title chosen because of its evocative qualities but also because of the direction in which the words in the title point us; haunts points us towards hauntology and follies points us towards what is seemingly foolish. This seeming foolishness, in our case, is self-conscious engagement with the look of the historical.

The use of the historical does carry with it legacy in that some believe history or the past “*does indeed constrain the present*” (Lowenthal 1985)<sup>1</sup>. An artist who uses the historical knows that by embarking upon the vessel of historical exploration they are entering upon a fool’s enterprise.

Penny Byrne, Sam Leach, Simon Mee and Kate Rohde, the artists in *Haunts and Follies* would beg to differ, they do not see the past as a constraint but as a means of engagement with the present. This view of history is informed by a more fluid definition; that the past does not constrain and the present is “as self-sufficient as it claims to be;” (Jameson, Frederic. p39)<sup>2</sup>.

These artists use the historical to understand and participate in the present. To do this the artists use the historical to locate us in a gap, an undisclosed location outside of our comprehension of both past and present or as Shakespeare puts it;

“*He uses his folly like a stalking-horse, and under the presentation of that he shoots his wit.*”—Shakespeare: *As You Like It*, v4

Of course in this case “He” is also a “She”, artists of both genders sneak up on the subconscious, hunt out the locked closet, the bricked up room, the missing relative and the funny smell coming from the chimney.

As the historical always seems to be accompanied by its handmaidens, tradition and nostalgia, in the case of the *Haunts and Follies* your bedfellows are the nostalgiques and ironesque. The nostalgiques and ironesque are irony and nostalgia- but not exactly irony and nostalgia as we know them.

The artists may use the nostalgic reflex to draw the viewer in, but once the viewer has clicked their heels three times and said “I want to go home” they arrive somewhere else and it is no place like home. It is a non-specific moment in time and often contains deliberately contradictory or contemporary subject matter that invokes the present. This insertion of the present disrupts the nostalgic, naïve or childlike gaze.<sup>3</sup>

Svetlana Boym puts forward an idea that defines this as reflective nostalgia. Boym identifies two broad categories of nostalgia, reflective and restorative nostalgia to help distinguish how nostalgia functions.

“*Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt.*”<sup>4</sup> (Boym, 2011)

WG Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn* would be considered an example of a reflective nostalgia book that could be described as a somewhat apocryphal travel log as written by a depressed German émigré about a dreary part of England. There is a sense of meandering engagement, the tone shifting and slithering from acute observation to reverie, from the past to the present and somewhere in-between. It is this quality of evasiveness that I felt partly expressed what the artists tried to achieve in their various ways.

*"My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas, which seemed out of place in these military installations. But the closer I came to these ruins, the more any notions of a mysterious isle of the dead receded, and the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our civilisation after its extinction in some future catastrophe."..... (Sebald 1998)<sup>5</sup>*

The artists' works in *Haunts and Follies* occupy a space in-between the past and present; a place that is indefinable or outside of our comprehension.

This space or presence is defined as a haunt thus part of the hauntological. Hauntology as an idea originates with Derrida (Derrida 1994) and derives its inspiration from Freud's understanding of mourning which entailed;

*"a kind of hyper remembering, a process of obsessive recollection during which the survivor resuscitates the existence of the lost other in the space of the psyche, replacing an actual absence with an imaginary presence."* (Clewell, Tammy 2004).

Derrida's ideas are that a haunting<sup>8</sup> or spectre is not a supernatural entity but an unresolved past that inhabits our present. He believed there was no need to do away with the spectre of the past, rather there was value in working at this sense of mourning, to prevent the "ghost" becoming a safe nostalgic fantasy. Giving the spectre the ability to hover between life and death put it beyond the "the order of knowledge"<sup>9</sup> and made "established certainties vacillate."<sup>10</sup> (Davis, Colin 2005)

What the artists share in hauntology and reflective nostalgia, is "taking time out of time and about grasping the fleeing present."<sup>11</sup> (Boym, 2011). They use the past to stalk the present; they enter the ruins of our memories through the sweet folly of nostalgia and then rummage through the haunted spaces of our minds.

*I will leave the viewer to wonder what entanglements they may find.*

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## Footnotes

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**Penny Byrne**

*/PROTEST*  
2012, three hundred and fifteen porcelain figures,  
epoxy resin, enamel paints, variable dimensions







# Sam Leach

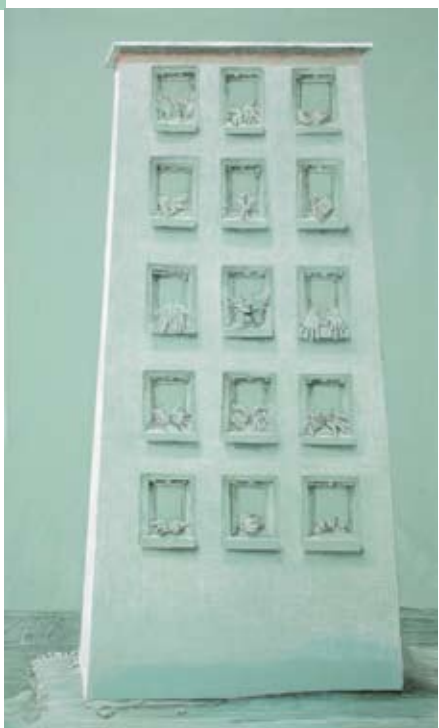
*Vultures and Target*  
2012, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 25 cm  
*Target, prepping*  
2012, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 25 cm

opposite: *Flight and Display 2*  
2012, oil and resin on wood, 45 x 35 cm





left to right:  
*Pine Tree Peet and Bonsai Bill*  
 2011, chalk and charcoal on paper  
 112 x 140 cm  
*Trifid GH Design*  
 2012, chalk and charcoal on paper  
 135 x 115 cm  
*Hermit Hotel*  
 2012, chalk and charcoal on paper  
 150 x 90 cm







**Kate Rohde**



*Crystal Folly*  
2012, resin and mixed materials  
installation detail, variable dimensions

opposite: *Amethyst Mural*  
2012, resin, 100x30x30 cm



He built a ruin in his garden, he told me. A gothic folly. In Brookfield, I asked. Yes, he said, why not? I smiled and asked for another drink. You should come see it, he said, as he tipped my glass against his. Red wine splashed on my hand. He didn't need a ruin in his garden to invite me back to his place. I would have followed him anywhere.

We left the dark, smoky nightclub behind. In the taxi he kissed me, hard and wet. The skull ring on my right hand got caught in his long tangle of black hair. How gothic, he said. I laughed. How gothic.

He pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his black silk waistcoat and tipped the astonished taxi-driver, laughing. It's not a virtue to be rich, he said, money means nothing, it impresses nobody of value. As an arts student surviving on home-brand spaghetti, I was deeply impressed nonetheless.

A sheer black scarf over the lampshade in the living room made the light soft and shadowy. Eight porcelain dolls, all dressed in black, sat lined up on the couch. All of their eyes were missing. They saw too much, he said. I smiled at him. He was so funny. You're so funny, I said. Funny strange or funny ha-ha, he asked. I didn't answer.

How did you get this house, I asked him, all this money? He was twenty-two. What twenty-two-year-old had a five-bedroom house on acreage with a gothic folly in the garden and hundred-dollar bills to give to taxi-drivers? He shrugged and cast his eyes down. That, he said, is an eight-drink story. Wait here.

I peeked under the black throws at floral couches. The coffee table was a coffin, one iron candelabra at either end, grotesquely decorated with old wax. Dead rose petals were scattered all over the floor. Mantelpiece and bookshelves glistened dimly with tightly crammed objects: books of anatomy, bottles of dark blue glass, intricate silver frames studded with jet and onyx, pictures of dead birds, a rubber bat, pieces of clocks, a jar of old keys, a Hello Kitty all in black with its head stitched on in blood red cotton. Dust, so much dust, and a smell of old paper and incense.

He was back. On a silver tray, he had a bottle of absinthe, two crystal glasses, a bowl of sugar cubes, a jug of water, and a slotted spoon. I've never drunk absinthe, I said. Then you haven't lived, he answered. He poured the absinthe and placed the spoon over the glass with a sugar cube on it. Watch this, he said, splashing the sugar cube with absinthe and setting it alight. It burned blue and orange, and the sugar turned viscous and dripped through into the glass. How gothic, I laughed, echoing his phrase from earlier. Floral, bitter, liquorice. I drank it. And another. And another.

They disappeared, he said eventually. My parents, who own this house. I got up one morning... one afternoon, and they were gone.

Disappeared?

It was in the news. A year ago.

I don't read the news, I said. It's time taken away from reading Poe.

He leaned back on the couch, a pale hand across his chest, Thomas-Chatterton style. Perhaps they are dead, he said.

I said, I'm sorry. Then I was on top of him, unlacing my black pvc corset, spilling out of my clothes, kneeling too hard on the guts of one of the porcelain dolls.

• •

Morning fog pressed on the windows. It's that time of year, he said. It will lift to a cool, clear day. Brisbane winters are beautiful, don't you think?

I thought he was beautiful. His white body, his black tattoos. I rose and looked out the window, down to his folly. Who built it, I asked.

His hot breath was on my bare shoulder a moment later. I built it, he said.

I gazed at it for a while. A corner of a building that never was, roofless, with an arched door. A few metres along, some pale rocks that looked as though they had fallen there rather than being carefully placed. An empty stone arch.

I'm going to grow ivy all over it, he said.

It looks odd, with the eucalypt forest behind, I said, it doesn't match the landscape.

The gothic has always been about what is strange, mismatched, out of the ordinary, he replied lightly. I could tell he was annoyed with me.

Can we go down there? I asked.

Sure, get dressed. There's a trap door.

A trap door?

He smiled. A dungeon. You'll love it.

You built a dungeon?

It was an air raid shelter in world war two.

I was already pulling my long black skirt back on, grabbing his t-shirt on the floor to pull over my head so I didn't have to lace myself back into the corset. He zipped himself back into his jeans and opened the bedroom door shirtless.



The house was still and quiet apart from the ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway. We went out through the kitchen and across dewy grass. Clouds kissed the treetops. My feet shivered.

It's amazing, I said, my hand on the cool stone. It looks just like the real thing.

My grandfather was a stone mason, he explained. He taught me everything he knew. He's dead now. When Mum and Dad went missing, I did this to keep myself sane. Days went by and I... I couldn't imagine what had happened to them. But the stone kept me company. The stone had no expectations of me.

I touched his arm, and goosebumps rose over his skin. Then I saw the trapdoor, a cement slab in the ground behind the empty arch. Show me, I said.

We won't go in, he replied. It's creepy.

I bit my tongue. His whole house was creepy. There was a stuffed two-headed lamb in one of the downstairs rooms; skeletons and mementoes mori everywhere; a mouldering smell of old books. Why should the air raid shelter be any creepier than that? He knelt on the ground and turned the iron ring twice, then heaved. The muscles in his arms swelled. I noticed for the first time how strong he was; the languid dandyism was an affectation. Finally he had it open. I smelled dirt and mould. Airlessness.

You're right, I said, it is creepy.

He dropped the slab with a thud. I'm cold, he said, let's go back to bed.

• •

I didn't go home. Days passed, then weeks. My flatmate texted me repeatedly, but I ignored her. Don't write back, he said. What could she know about us? What could she know about love? Mad love, crazy love? I missed all my classes. I relished the idea that I would not pass my courses this semester: it would be a mark of our true, dark, undying passion. Lovers like us didn't need flatmates or grade point averages. We just needed each other in the gloomy, echoing house. I wore his clothes or nothing at all. We went from his bed to his kitchen to the lounge room and back. Music thudded the whole time: Sisters of Mercy or the Mission or Nine Inch Nails or Taake or Gorgoroth. He read aloud to me: from De Quincey or Blake or Anton LaVey's Satanic Bible. I loved everything he played and read and did. He said, you are perfect, you are the perfect woman for me. I said, play me some more music. Show me some more art. You are art, he said. You are hand-carved by fallen angels. Love was fast, brutal, burning.

I'll never let you go, he said. A silver knife, a few drops of blood mingled on bare white skin.

I'll never let you go.

• •

It is dark under here. Dark and airless and my skin stings where he cut me. I wonder if his skin stings up there, above the ground. I know he sits at the window and watches the folly, in morning fog and cold moonlight. I keep hoping he will come back and say, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking straight.

He was never thinking straight. I remember the dull, mad gleam of his eyes and the clamminess of his palms and I wonder how I trusted him. Trusted him as he tied my hands loosely in the living room, with the eyeless dolls as witnesses. They saw too much. Trusted him all the way down here into the air-raid shelter—the dungeon. It's a game, he said. Just a game.

Days have passed. This isn't a game.

I found them, just a few minutes ago. I have no light, but I felt them. At first I thought I'd fallen over a pile of sticks, but no. They are bones. At first I couldn't bring myself to touch them with my still-bound hands, to think about them. But in the end I had to know. Yes, there were two skulls. I knew they were his parents.

Disappeared.

How gothic, I keep thinking as I wait and hope. How gothic.

**Penny Byrne**

*iPROTEST*

2012, three hundred and fifteen porcelain figures,  
epoxy resin, enamel paints, variable dimensions  
courtesy the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney

**Sam Leach**

*Asselijn Probe Launch Protection*

2011, oil and resin on wood, 45 x 35 cm

*Flight and Display 2*

2012, oil and resin on wood, 45 x 35 cm

*Geon Group*

2012, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 45 cm

*Experiment with cockatiel and target*

2012, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 25 cm

*Vultures and Target*

2012, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 25 cm

*Target prepping*

2012, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 25 cm  
courtesy the artist and Sullivan and Strumpf, Sydney

**Simon Mee**

*Pine Tree Pete and Bonsai Bill*

2011, chalk and charcoal on paper  
112 x 140 cm

*Triffid Girl Design*

2012, chalk and charcoal on paper  
135 x 115 cm

*A Monument to Folly*

2012, chalk and charcoal on paper  
140 x 112 cm

*Hermit Hotel*

2012, chalk and charcoal on paper  
150 x 90 cm

*There was a crooked man*

2010, chalk and charcoal on primed paper  
130 x 140 cm

*The Four Riders*

2012, chalk and charcoal on board  
63 cm diameter  
courtesy the artist and Lorraine Pilgrim

**Simon Mee, James Dowdall and Brad Nunn**

*Baba Yaga's Doll House*

timber, composite board, paint, aluminium  
130 x 60 x 80 cm approx.  
courtesy the artists

**Kate Rohde**

*Amethyst Marsupial*

2012, resin, 115 x 35 x 35 cm

*Crystal Folly*

2012, resin and mixed materials  
variable dimensions  
courtesy the artist and Karen Woodbury Gallery,  
Melbourne



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Cover image: Sam Leach  
Assailip Probe Launch Protection  
2011, 45 x 35 cm oil and resin on wood  
courtesy the artist and  
Sullivan + Strumpf, Sydney. (detail)

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